



Engaging Newcomers

Perspectives from Newcomers and Service Providers

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Engaging Newcomers:
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Executive Summary

- What are the experiences of newcomers seeking supports and services?
- What keeps newcomers engaged with services, or can cause disengagement?

ASSIST Community Services Centre, Multi Cultural Health Brokers, and MAPS Alberta Capital Region worked in partnership to interview 25 newcomers about their experiences seeking support from services, and determinants of engagement with services and supports. 12 service providers (many who had experienced immigration themselves) also participated in discussions on engaging newcomers seeking support.

Newcomer participants were grateful to be in Canada, but described life in Canada as more challenging than they expected. Many were initially unaware supports existed, and felt frustrated they did not know about available supports when they most needed them. The participants spoke warmly about the supports they now currently received, which they perceived as supportive, informative, and responsive.

A welcoming approach and active listening were identified as key qualities for newcomers to stay engaged with supports. Recommendations from both newcomers and service providers included more information provided to newcomers (either pre-arrival or as orientation post-arrival), and increased awareness of available supports to prevent or alleviate times of stress or crisis.

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Introduction

This project was conducted with the support and partnership of ASSIST Community Services Centre and Multicultural Health Brokers Co-op. Both organizations wanted to explore and share newcomer experiences seeking and accessing services and supports, and what factors facilitated or were a barrier to engagement.

Interviews were conducted with 1) newcomers receiving services, and 2) service providers supporting newcomers. A letter explaining the project was provided to newcomers invited to participate, and participants were thanked with a grocery store gift card. Interview notes were coded in NVIVO 10 software to identify themes.

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Newcomer Participants

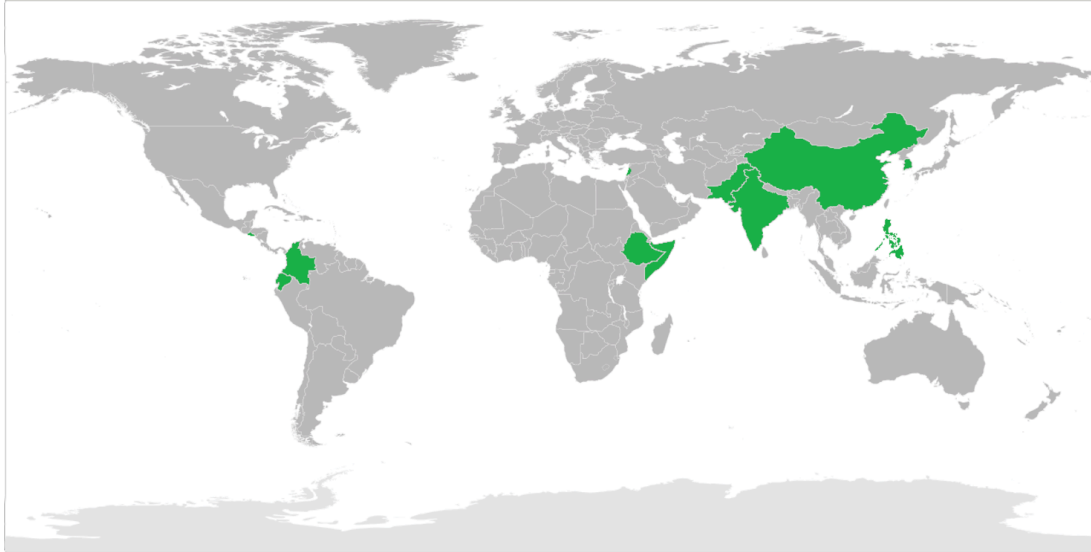
25 newcomers participated in 14 interviews. 12 interviews were conducted individually (or in couples), and 2 group interviews were conducted with 5-6 participants each.

Newcomer participants' home countries included Kenya, Pakistan, Colombia, Ecuador, El Salvador, Philippines, India, Lebanon, China, Korea, and Somalia (see map on next page). A few participants lived in other Canadian locations (including Quebec, Winnipeg, and Fort McMurray) before moving to Edmonton.

A number of newcomer participants were employed as professionals, and others worked in labour positions (e.g. construction, cleaning) or were homemakers. A small number worked or volunteered with the agencies they were interviewed through.

Almost all of the newcomer families had children; all but 2 participants, and one participant was pregnant at the time of interview. Children ranged in age from infant to adult.

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A map of newcomer participants' home countries

Expectations of Canada

Participants were overall happy and grateful to be in Canada. They felt they had more opportunities in Canada for a good life, and spoke to additional opportunities for work and education, and the ability to help and support family at home.

Many families also found life in Canada more challenging than expected, especially at first. Participants said they wished they had known how difficult it would be, and how long it would take to become comfortable. They felt that being financially successful was attainable, but it was much harder work than expected.

Families were surprised when the skills that the Canadian government required them to have to immigrate were not accepted in Canada for employment.

Ongoing immigration paperwork and processes were unexpected, and requirements such as needing to renew a work permit could mean spending months waiting and unable to work to bring home an income.

First Experiences in Canada

Participants often felt alone and unsupported when they first arrived in Canada. Many anticipated more information would be provided once they arrived, such as how to find housing. Many participants said they did

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not initially know supports existed for settlement or employment assistance, or where to find them.

When I got here, I had the visa and the passport, and this seemed like a “Welcome to Canada”, but upon arrival it seemed like nobody cared that I was here. No welcome package or anything. I thought it would be like “Welcome to Canada, next week come and meet us here and we can help to get you set up, explain how to job hunt here, explain how to write a CV in Canada, explain what you need to get an apartment,” but nothing. I came with all my savings and by the end of the first year it was gone.

Newcomer Participant

Locating Supports and Services

While very grateful for the services they now receive, not knowing services were available to them when they first arrived was a source of frustration for many of the newcomers interviewed. Unaware supports were available, many struggled and at times felt desperate (for example, one participant described not knowing EI was available during a very stressful time of lost employment). Participants noted that the Canadian culture is quite supportive, but you have to know where to find or ask for support.

If there is anything I learned from the experience of coming here it's that you have to be dependent on other people to be kind enough to tell you about organizations that can help you. Sometimes people come and they have nobody, and they don't know that these services even exist.

Newcomer Participant

Determinants of Engagement with Supports and Services

The newcomers interviewed identified a number of considerations that could either facilitate or be a barrier to engagement with services and supports.

Invested and Caring Supports

Newcomers spoke warmly about being able to seek support from service providers who were open, welcoming, did not rush them, and who were genuinely interested in the families and their well-being. A participant mentioned they could tell when people were “only there for the money”

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rather than because they wanted to help others. A strong and trusting relationship between the families and service providers was a key recommendation from participants, and participants spoke to a feeling of peace and ease of mind when they had this. Careful and active listening from service providers was a catalyst for families to stay engaged with a service provider.

She planned to just ask two questions and go home as soon as possible, but as soon as the worker made her feel welcome she burst into tears that she found somebody she could talk to. She felt like the other places she went to only talked about the services they provide, and were not interested in establishing a relationship with her.

Interviewer Notes

What keeps newcomers like ourselves engaged in services and with agencies is usefulness. If a service meets needs and goals. Some agencies we have been to have preconceived notions about who an immigrant is, what their story must be, and what they are in need of, they barely take the time to listen to each individual story.

Newcomer Participant Couple

Anxiety around Seeking Support

Newcomers are sometimes afraid to seek support, worried that they may get into trouble with authorities, or even deported. Extra efforts to be welcoming and provide clear information were identified as ways to address these very real concerns.

Unaware of Services: “I didn’t have any idea where to go”

The barrier participants most frequently identified to accessing services was that they did not know services were available to them.

Some participants were initially connected to agencies through referral by healthcare providers, particularly for prenatal care. A number of participants in this project located agencies by looking online for assistance. Some participants were initially wary of free support services, feeling skeptical that services would be offered at no cost, and not knowing anyone to ask about the organization’s credibility.

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A small number of participants noted being taken advantage of financially in their interest in immigrating to Canada. For example, by paying high fees for assistance completing paperwork, and later finding out free support was available that they were unaware of. Families were afraid of getting in trouble with authorities so did not challenge the fees. One newcomer described being recruited by a now-defunct organization for live-in caregivers that charged exorbitant fees, told her not to mention the fees when immigrating, and then continued to charge her nearly her entire income for months post-arrival.

Location

A location easy to access was frequently cited as service strength. Some participants mentioned receiving previous services that were good but too far away to access regularly.

Families connected to services at school sites were especially appreciative of the services available within schools. They felt the in-school supports were easy to access, and facilitated communication with school staff.

Large families dependent on public transit particularly found location to be an important determinant. Navigating public transit was sometimes difficult for participants, and even once familiar, participants did not always feel safe traveling on public transit. If participants felt the service's location or neighbourhood was unsafe, this could also be a barrier to access.

Responsive Services and Supports Targeted to Current Needs: "They help at the instant we need it"

Participants described times when they received services immediately for urgent needs, such as eviction. Unsurprisingly, newcomers appreciated when services and programs met and addressed their current needs. Pregnant mothers appreciated the pre-natal classes they were referred to, and those in need of housing and counseling were relieved to find support filling these needs.

Bureaucracy and Wait Times

Long application forms, referrals to get appointments, and long wait times were mentioned. The participants understood the need for protocols but felt that more flexibility was needed in times of crisis to receive immediate

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supports. A couple of participants identified being transferred several times to different staff within an agency as a barrier to engagement.

Knowledgeable and Resourceful Service Providers

Participants appreciated when service providers were informative, shared what the families needed to know, and were willing to find out anything they couldn't answer.

Unfriendly or Rushed Services

Some newcomers had experiences seeking services where they felt the service providers were unfriendly, "cold", uninterested, or as if the service providers felt the family's needs were not urgent.

Service agents need to realize that people come to them with their life stories it's not the same like when people come to buy something from you- that's a completely different type of customer service. It's people's lives. And by the time they come looking for help they are probably in a very desperate situation and panicking, The least you could do is not add to their panic and frustration and try point them in the right direction if you cannot help them yourself.

Newcomer Participant

A couple of participants noted that one or two previous service providers acted like the supports they were offering were "coming from their own pockets" and gave the impression that the families should feel personally indebted to the worker. This was very uncomfortable for the families.

Language

Language was identified as a barrier to seeking support. Conversations in English can be difficult; an open and engaged response can help keep clients engaged when there is a language barrier.

When families speak some English, forms and documentation can still be overwhelming as they are often formal and technical, and there may be anxiety around doing something important incorrectly.

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Cultural Familiarity

Working with someone from their cultural background was a positive experience for most of the participants. It was a relief for participants to be able to speak their first language and feel more deeply understood.

Someone with personal experience immigrating to Canada was also considered an asset for some participants.

It's like a circle, when somebody makes you feel welcome you feel like you need to help anybody else who may be struggling because that could have been you.

Newcomer Participant (who now volunteers translating)

One participant said they preferred to work with someone from another community for privacy.

Funding Restrictions

Some services are only funded for specific newcomer populations, making newcomers without that status unable to receive services at the agency. One participant explained how she knew she would go to a specific agency for support as soon as she were eligible, and waited until she could go seek supports there.

Needs and Recommendations from Newcomers

Information, Orientation, and Increased Awareness of Available Supports

They could have eased a lot of pain if they just had a simple welcome pack when they give me a visa, or when I land just to give me a heads-up with simple information. Do they not want me to be a valuable member of society?

Newcomer Participant

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Newcomers suggested some information about settling in Canada be provided with visas. For example, packages which identify available supports, and emergency information.

One family noted that private organizations exist to help newcomers settle, charging fees for their services. These services will help locate housing, greet you at the airport, and identify local services such as hospitals. They will also provide referrals for services such as employment support. The existence of organizations charging fees for such services is indicative of the need for this type of support.

A few participants mentioned that preparing for cold winter weather is an orientation need, including how to find appropriate winter clothing that is affordable. One participant shared a story of how greatly they appreciated a winter recreation event organized for newcomers. Living in an apartment, there was no outdoor play space for her children who missed being able to play freely. The mother was very grateful for the winter recreation opportunity, as she didn't know what to teach her children about snow, or how to play in the snow.

As noted earlier, the biggest barrier to supports identified by participants was lack of awareness that services and supports were available to them, feeling like finding supports was "left up to chance." Participants recommended more advertising and promotion of available supports and services.

Understanding and Empathetic Services

Efforts to make newcomers feel welcome when they first arrive are essential to newcomer support and engagement. A few families spoke to feeling afraid when they first arrived and were settling, unsure if they were going to get in trouble for things such as filling out a form wrong, but not knowing where to go for help.

Several participants spoke warmly about how they felt their service providers cared about them, and tried to help them. Being in a new country with an unfamiliar culture and with extreme winter weather conditions can leave newcomers feeling very isolated and vulnerable. Having someone familiar with the culture to help navigate systems and provide emotional and social support was deeply appreciated by newcomers; having someone you can trust when you feel alone can be a lifeline.

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Realistic Employment Information

A few participants wished they had known before arrival how important Canadian work experience would be, particularly newcomers arriving as skilled professionals. They felt they had needed to demonstrate their education and skills in order to be allowed to immigrate, but then these same skills and experience were not recognized when seeking employment upon arrival.

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Service Provider Participants

12 interviews were conducted with service providers from 2 organizations focused on the needs of newcomers. Roles of the participants included employment counselors, settlement counselors, community connectors, intake, and health & family support. Many of the service providers who participated had personal experience immigrating to Canada.

Participants worked with clients and families from a diverse range of regions and cultures, including India, China, Korea, the Philippines, Ukraine, Russia, Spanish-speaking cultures, North and South Sudan, Egypt, Ethiopia, and countries in the Middle East.

Service Provider Perspectives on Newcomer Engagement

The service providers interviewed identified a number of characteristics in their organizations and practice they felt fostered client engagement.

Welcoming, Supportive and Responsive

A welcoming reception area was recognized as an important part of engagement. Participants described efforts to greet clients, noting that lack of acknowledgement was an unpleasant experience for newcomers, who may already be nervous or uncomfortable speaking English. One worker posted information in languages common for their clientele in the reception area for clients to see when they first arrive.

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Newcomers are often coming to our service because they are anxious, desperate or even panicking. They need to feel welcome and they need to know that everybody at this agency wants to help them and see them succeed.

Service Provider

Service providers expressed they took the time to listen to and support clients, and worked towards goals set by the clients rather than instructing them on what they should do. One service provider gave an example of a female client who was told at another organization she could not possibly do a traditionally male occupation, but the service provider interviewed was happy to provide a training referral. Participants suggested providing clear and honest information can be a relief for families, who often hear confusing or contradicting information.

The things that frustrates newcomers the most is when they cannot get clear answers about the urgent things they need to understand or they call the same place and depending on who they speak to they get very different answers and suggestions about what to do on their applications or whatever they need help with. This makes them have less trust and faith in the agency and the people working there.

Service Provider

Service providers also suggested that being too bureaucratic or clinical can be a deterrent to engagement, which was also shared in the interviews with the families.

Being able to provide prompt services was identified as a facilitator for engagement with Newcomer families. Having to wait for an assessment, and then wait for a referral can be a barrier to engagement.

Families may also present with one need, and with further conversation and the development of a trusting relationship other needs are identified. Workers indicated they tried to be flexible in their approaches in working with families to best meet their needs and preferences.

Location

Like the families, a few workers noted that service location was important, particularly for families traveling on public transit with children.

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Connected to Local Communities

The service providers interviewed felt that the organizations they worked for were connected to local communities, helping the staff to understand and be responsive to both ongoing and emerging needs.

Needs Identified by Service Providers

Employment Support

Many of the workers spoke to the frustration and regret families can feel when they realize their credentials are not accepted in Canada, and that not having Canadian work experience is a significant barrier to employment. Service providers explained that families may not expect to work in the same role as they did prior to immigration, but they expect to be able to work in the same field, and this is often difficult to attain. The point system used to assess skills was identified as possibly offering a false sense of security and fostering unrealistic hopes for employment.

The staff interviewed felt that newcomers work to integrate and become productive citizens but underemployment and its resulting financial stress is a large barrier to inclusion.

It is a little bit sad and frustrating because oftentimes newcomer professionals come to the realization that the amount of converting they have to do is as long as the years they already studied, feels like another degree, or they realize the costs of all the exams is high and they cannot afford to do the qualifying as quickly as they wanted to do.

Service Provider

Basic Needs

Support workers identified housing as one of the main needs for newcomer families. Many families were also referred to the Food Bank.

Language Support

Many families want to continue learning the English language, or need help with translation. Language support is a vital component to helping support families and foster integration.

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Navigating Systems

Navigating complex systems such as healthcare or the immigration process can be complicated and confusing. Some of the support workers who were interviewed worked primarily with parents, and assistance navigating the healthcare system was a common need. Expectations and rumours can contribute to incorrect beliefs (for example maternity benefits through Employment Insurance can be misconstrued as being paid to have children).

Support workers noted a need to help families new to Canada with taxes, including filling out forms, and knowing what they are eligible for. It was noted that benefits are generally not well-advertised or explained to newcomers, so many can go for years without receiving Child Tax Benefit, for example.

Immigration forms are sometimes long and complicated, and fees can be associated with renewals and applications, which can be a significant financial burden. Citizenship was also identified as a long and complicated process, and newcomers may require assistance understanding the forms and requirements.

One worker also noted that filling out forms can be a stressful experience for some families, who are worried about doing something wrong and there being serious negative consequences. Families may also be from areas of the world where authority figures are corrupt, or there is a risk of persecution. Some newcomers will avoid services for fear of bringing attention to themselves; being asked their name or for photo ID may be alarming for some.

Emotional Support

Support workers explained that it is a relief for some families to have someone who will take the time to listen to them and understand their needs (also described by the newcomers receiving services who were interviewed). Being a newcomer can be a very isolating and stressful experience.

People are leaving their support systems from home, and navigating new roles and expectations of even very fundamental family dynamics such as spousal roles and parenting. Not only are families navigating how they interact with their new cultural environment, they may also be navigating

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changes in how they interact with one another. All of these challenges require sensitivity and emotional support.

The interviews with professionals supporting newcomers reflect a concern that the stress of immigration, particularly underemployment and isolation, can create mental health concerns for families. Counseling was a frequent referral for some support workers.

Support for Temporary Foreign Workers

Support Workers indicated a need for more support for Temporary Foreign Workers, as some organizations are not funded for and cannot support these workers.

Recommendations from Service Providers

Information on Realistic Expectations for Immigration

More information provided to families pre-migration was suggested, such as brochures that indicate items such as the cost of housing and groceries, and that these could be made available for each province or territory. The newcomer participants receiving services also recommended pre-arrival information to assist families in settlement.

Efforts to Promote Inclusion

The most important thing that newcomers need is to truly make them feel like they are one of us, and one of the community.

Service Provider

Service providers suggested that more efforts be made to promote the inclusion of families new to Canada. One participant recommended training for everyday public services to encourage public workers to be patient and helpful.

One participant noted that locating services can be difficult, also discussed by the newcomer families interviewed. The staff member suggested services do more promotion, both to connect newcomers to needed services and to help newcomers feel welcome and cared for.

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Recognizing that newcomers immigrate with different needs was also recommended. A refugee family fleeing violence might have had much less time to learn about the country they are migrating to, for example, and have a history of trauma that service providers should be sensitive to.

Mental Health Support

As noted earlier, the interviews with support workers indicated a concern that longstanding immigration-related challenges (such as underemployment and isolation) can result in mental health concerns for some families. That many families are unaware supports are available, or only access them as a last resort, can mean a delay which exacerbates the need for mental health supports as families struggle for some time without the supports they need.

There may also be a stigma around mental health supports for some cultures, which can be an additional barrier for some individuals.

Holistic Supports

Being able to provide supports to all members of a family and for different kinds of needs was recommended. Families or clients create relationships with support providers and it is difficult when they are unable to offer supports for other challenges the families may be facing (though workers will do their best to offer what support they can, and make appropriate supportive referrals).

Another type of holistic support recommended was childcare for parents (particularly single parents). Recreational supports were also recommended. Families may not seek these supports out as they have more pressing needs, but recreation is an important part of a healthy and happy family life. This was also noted in one of the interviews with a newcomer parent.

Support for Single Parents

In addition to the everyday challenges of being the only adult in a household with children, in some cultures there may also be taboos around being widowed, divorced, a single parent, or remarried. For families without local support networks, not having another adult you can depend on or receive support from is extremely difficult.

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Support for International Post-Secondary Students Completing their Program

One support worker noted that many international students are interested in working in Canada once their studies are completed, and resources targeted to these students would be beneficial.

Conclusion

Newcomers and service providers both shared that while Canada offers many opportunities, being a newcomer to Canada can be more difficult than expected. Newcomers can feel isolated, and underemployment can be stressful as savings become quickly depleted. Providing more information to newcomers (either pre-arrival or upon arrival) will help facilitate realistic expectations and less stressful settlement. Increased awareness of supports available will help newcomers become connected to supports when they are needed, and prevent or alleviate crises. Welcoming service providers who listen carefully and can help meet needs are key to facilitating and maintaining engagement with supports and services.